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AUTHOR Conyne, Robert K.; Silver, Robert J.
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ABSTRACT

This study compares the differential effectiveness of two experiential approaches, direct and vicarious, to the induction of change in self-reports of attitudes toward personal growth groups. University undergraduate volunteers were assigned and exposed to one of three treatment conditions: 1) a structured, direct experience in a micro-laboratory personal growth group design; 2) a vicarious experience involving the viewing of a filmed personal growth group; or 3) a no treatment control condition. A questionnaire containing six likert-type scale items involving attitudes toward personal growth groups was completed by each subject after exposure to the experimental treatment. Results by the study strongly support the basic assumption that attitudinal changes are accomplished most validly through participation in which individuals are directly involved. These results have clear implications for the counseling professional engaged in conceptualizing and implementing developmental programs that focus entirely or in part on attitude change. (Author)

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Effects of Two Experiential Approaches on Attitudes Toward Growth Groups

Robert K. Conyne and Robert J. Silver

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

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The laboratory method of social learning provides the basis for T-group theory and methodology as well as for a wide variety of other group experiences whose predominant focus is the growth and development of individuals and/or social systems. A primary assumption of the laboratory method is that, "... understandings and skills of participation can be learned validly only through processes of participation in which the learner is directly involved (Benne, Bradford and Lippitt, 1964)." Here, the generation of behavioral output serves as the data from which individuals learn about themselves and about each other. Participants are involved in the process of "learning to learn" in a group setting in which behavioral experimentation and subsequent analysis is encouraged. It has been asserted that such direct experience in a climate of permissiveness and open inquiry induces an intense personal involvement which enables a profound kind of learning to occur (Bradford, 1964).

While experience in group interaction appears to be a necessary condition for attitudinal change to occur, direct experience may not provide the sole avenue for its satisfaction. Vicarious experience (observing others actively involved in an event) has become increasingly recognized as an important factor, as research in social learning theory and in self-directed groups has demonstrated. Research findings of Bandura (1969) and of Berzon, Pious, & Farson (1963) suggest strongly that vicarious experiencing of the attitudes and behavior of others is an important factor in the social learning of the observer. The more recent research of Farson (1972) included an experimental condition consisting of the vicarious experiencing of an on-going personal growth group via television. Results were encouraging enough to Farson for him to envision vicarious experience as developing into a major social technology in the area of community mental health.

Reaction to the potential of the personal growth group has not, however, been universally positive. As they are reflected in the popular literature, attitudes toward personal growth groups seem to vary rather widely. In this lay literature, Howard (1968;1970), Newsweek (1969), Rakstis (1970), Time (1970), and others have provided a collection of critical observations which would tend to be illustrative of the range of feelings about personal growth groups. In the professional literature, Gibb (1971), Klaw (1965), Koch (1971), Lieberman, Yalom, & Miles (1972), Rogers (1970), and others have dealt with many of these same issues of attitude. Some dimensions which seem to be consistently of concern relate to attitudes regarding the value, appropriateness, and danger of personal growth groups.

The current study took as its concern this breadth of reaction toward growth group experiences, and the need for investigation of a methodology for increasing the attraction of such group experiences for individuals who could potentially profit from them. It was the specific purpose of this study to determine which of two experientially-based treatments (direct or vicarious) is more effective in changing the attitudes of university students with regard to the above-mentioned dimensions of personal growth groups. It was hypothesized that the direct experience treatment would induce greatest levels of "therapeutic attraction," with less change resulting for Ss in the vicarious experience group.

Method

Subjects

Fifty-three undergraduate students at a large midwestern state university participated in the study. Residence hall directors of three separate house residences had independently contacted the Student Counseling Service, indicating that several students were interested in obtaining information about personal

growth groups. Students who voluntarily appeared for three evening sessions which were scheduled to meet their requests for information, constituted the S pool for the investigation.

Procedure

The experimental design consisted of three treatment conditions: (a) "direct experience" (n=22); (b) "vicarious experience" (n=19); and (c) "no treatment" control (n=12). Each S group was assigned to its treatment on a random basis.

The experiential treatments were analogous in structural design, each containing the following elements: (a) a 15-minute didactic introduction to the theory of personal growth groups which was based upon the "Johari Window" (Luft, 1963); (b) a 45-minute specific experiential component, described below; and (c) a 15-minute process discussion. This same format was followed for the control group, but here the Ss attitudes were measured before the experience was provided.

The specific experiential component of the direct treatment consisted of a set of microlaboratory exercises which provided Ss opportunities for: (a) active participation (verbal and nonverbal); (b) spontaneity; (c) group development; (d) process observation; and (e) belongingness. Specific exercises used in the microlab were the following:

Exercise	Time (minutes)
1. Non-verbal milling (individually) (a) pick another person (b) talk non-verbally (c) talk verbally	10
2. Non-verbal milling (couples) (a) couple pick couple (b) quartet talk non-verbally (c) quartet talk verbally	10

3. Non-verbal milling (quartets) 20

   (a) quartet pick quartet
   (b) octets improvise non-verbally (circle, square, cyllinder)
   (c) octets process improvisation

4. Octet Physiogram 5

   (a) (place yourself where you feel you belong in your group)

The vicarious experience treatment provided Ss with the opportunity to observe others who were actively involved in a personal growth group. Its specific experiential component was "Journey Into Self,"[1] an edited videotaped film compressing 16 hours of a personal growth group into 45-minutes. The film presents to the viewer a brief overview of a personal growth group, which contains several personal and emotional interactions. It provides the opportunity for viewer identification with individual group participants who experienced emotions of differing intensity.

Subjects assigned to the two experiential treatments completed the assessment instrument immediately following treatment. "No treatment" control Ss first completed the instrument and then participated in an experientially-based program. Test results obtained from the no treatment control Ss were assumed to have provided base-line data for comparison with the two experiential groups.

Instrumentation

A short, six-item Likert-type five-point questionnaire was used to assess attitudes relevant to personal growth groups and which seem to be generally of concern. Those dimensions measured were: (a) perceived level of information;

[1] "Journey Into Self," produced by W. McGaw, Western Behavioral Sciences Institute, LaJolla, California, 1968. Drs. Carl Rogers and Richard Farson, facilitators.

(b) perceived danger; (c) perceived general value; (d) perceived personal value; (e) perceived appropriateness to a university setting; and (f) interest in actual growth group participation.

Results

Data for each of the six attitudinal items were analyzed by independent one-way analyses of variance. The Scheffé test of multiple comparisons was used to follow-up any significant F values obtained from the analyses of varience (Winer, 1962).

Table 1 presents a summary of analysis of variance results. Significant attitudinal differences regarding personal growth groups were found on four of the six measured variables: (a) perceived danger ($p < .01$); (b) perceived general value ($p < .05$); (c) perceived personal value ($p < .01$); and (d) perceived appropriateness to a university setting ($p < .01$).

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation scores on the dependent variables by the three experimental groups.

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 3 depicts results of the Scheffé tests. These data reveal that the direct experience group changed in positive directions on those questionnaire items reflecting attitudes about perceived personal value, perceived general value, and perceived appropriateness. Differences between the direct and vicarious experience groups were also significant ($p < .05$) for the variables perceived

personal value and perceived appropriateness. The significant ($p < .01$) effect for the perceived danger variable was shown to be the result of greater levels of danger attributed by vicarious treatment Ss in comparison with both control Ss ($p < .05$) and direct experience Ss ($p < .01$). While statistically significant differences did not obtain for the variables of information level or participation interest, the data followed the pattern revealed for the items related to general and personal value, and to perceived appropriateness.

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

Results of this study strongly support the basic assumption of the laboratory method. The data suggest that direct experience afforded by micro-laboratory exercises can effectively modify selected attitudes toward personal growth groups. On three of the six attitudinal variables, the direct experience treatment (microlab) resulted in positive attitudinal changes. While the data followed a similar pattern for the vicarious group on these particular items, this treatment produced a negative impact with regard to perceived danger. While a trend did exist on the other scale items, the expectation that the vicarious experience treatment would modify attitudes in significantly positive directions was not confirmed. Explanations for the unexpected increase in perceived danger by the vicarious group Ss are largely speculative. It would appear that intense emotional expression viewed without the opportunity of the observer to be physically present (even non-verbally) evokes feelings of danger. Perhaps an opportunity is needed following such emotional expression for observer to "work through" their own emotional reactions to what was observed.

The current investigation would seem to argue for direct experience as a means of increasing attraction toward personal growth groups, while raising questions concerning the use of vicarious experience in this regard. These results, however, must be viewed within the context of an existing threat to the internal validity of the experiment. It should be noted that a partial confounding existed in the manipulation of the direct and vicarious treatments in that the actual content of the experience also varied between treatments. Further research which corrects this design flaw is needed.

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Table 1

Summary of Analyses of Variance of Attitude Scale Scores

Variable	Source	SS	df	MS	F
Information Level	Between	4.840	2	2.420	2.65
	Within	45.613	50	0.912	
	Total	50.453	52		
Perceived Danger	Between	7.041	2	3.521	5.87**
	Within	29.978	50	0.600	
	Total	37.019	52		
Perceived General Value	Between	5.973	2	2.987	3.68*
	Within	39.777	49	0.812	
	Total	45.750	51		
Perceived Personal Value	Between	9.516	2	4.758	5.20**
	Within	45.767	50	0.915	
	Total	55.283	52		
Perceived Appropriateness	Between	7.164	2	3.582	8.38**
	Within	21.364	50	0.427	
	Total	28.528	52		
Interest in Participating	Between	4.734	2	2.367	3.04
	Within	38.964	50	0.779	
	Total	43.698	52		

*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$

Table 2

Mean Scores and Standard Deviations on Variables Across Groups

Variable	Control		Direct		Vicarious	
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD
Level of Information	2.08	1.11	2.86	0.92	2.68	0.80
Perceived Danger[a]	3.67	0.75	3.72	0.75	2.95	0.76
Perceived General Value[a]	2.83	0.80	1.95	0.79	2.21	1.00
Perceived Personal Value	3.33	0.75	4.27	0.86	3.47	1.09
Perceived Appropriateness[a]	2.42	0.64	1.50	0.50	2.05	0.76
Interest in Participating	3.58	0.66	4.27	0.91	3.74	0.78

[a]Indicates scale reversal (low scores indicate positive attitude).

Table 3

Summary of Results of Scheffe' Comparisons Between Groups

Variable	Comparison		
	Control-Direct	Control-Vicarious	Direct-Vicarious
Information Level	N.S.	N.S.	N.S.
Perceived Danger	N.S.	*	**
Perceived General Value	*	N.S.	N.S.
Perceived Personal Value	*	N.S.	*
Perceived Appropriateness	**	N.S.	*
Interest in Participating	N.S.	N.S.	N.S.

*$p < .05$.
**$p < .01$.